

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP: CULTIVATING TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN YOUTH AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES:

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The Honourable Commissioner for Sports and Youth Development, Chairman of this occasion, distinguished guests, respected elders, officers of the law, esteemed members of the academia, representatives of youth organisations, ladies and gentlemen, all other courtesies duly extended. It is indeed an honour to stand before you today to speak on a topic that is both timely and deeply significant: **“The Power of Partnership – Cultivating Trust and Understanding Between Youth and Law Enforcement Agencies.”** It is timely, not only because we have a huge population of unemployed youths but due to happenings over the years and more recently, by the recent conflagration in which the nation was led the way of a consuming fire in the wake of the EndSARS protests and other associated crises.

Introduction

Every nation desire peace, security, and progress, but none of these can be achieved when there is distrust between those who enforce the law and the vibrant young citizens they are meant to protect. The relationship between young people and law enforcement agencies should ideally be built on respect, cooperation, and mutual responsibility. However, in reality, in many parts of our world, including our dear country, that relationship is fractured, stained by fear, suspicion, and sometimes, violence.

Society thrives only when there is trust between those who enforce the law and those they are meant to protect, particularly the youth. However, as remarked above, in many parts of the world, including Nigeria, this relationship has often been tensed and characterised by fear, misunderstanding, stereotypes, and occasional hostility. Yet, the potential of a powerful partnership exists: one where trust is cultivated, collaboration is nurtured, and the youth and law enforcement agencies stand together to secure a safer and more just society. Today, I speak not to apportion blame, but to build bridges. I speak to remind us that there is power in partnership; that when the youth and the police as well as other law enforcement agents

understand each other, trust each other, and work together, society becomes safer, stronger, and more just.

Historical Background and Current Realities

Throughout history, young people have been at the heart of social change, innovation and civil reform. Conversely, law enforcement agencies exist to protect lives, property, and maintain order. Ideally, these two groups should complement each other. However, in reality, mistrust has often prevailed. Around the world, young people have always been at the forefront of change generally. They raise their voices against injustice, they innovate, they dream. On the other hand, law enforcement agencies exist to ensure peaceful coexistence in society, securing the lives of the citizens, and upholding the rule of law. Ideally, as I said earlier, they should complement each other. Yet, in recent years, we have seen confrontation instead of collaboration.

In Nigeria, for example, incidents involving police brutality, particularly by the now-disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), created a wide gulf between the youth and the law enforcement agencies. The #EndSARS movement became the symbol of this breakdown of trust, young people demanding safety from those meant to protect them. The situation is not unique to Nigeria. In the United States, movements such as "Black Lives Matter" emerged following repeated incidents of police violence against young African Americans. Across Europe, Latin America, and parts of Asia, youth-police tensions have been recorded, often escalating from miscommunication and systemic injustice. These events tell a simple truth: the relationship is broken, but it is not beyond repair.

Roots of the Distrust

The strained relationship between the youth and the law enforcement agencies stems from various interlinked factors, a few of which can be itemised below as follows:

1. **Abuse of Power and Human Rights Violations:** Young people often encounter law enforcement through harassment, unlawful arrests, brutality, or extortion. This breeds resentment and fear.
2. **Stereotyping of Youth:** Many officers perceive youths as naturally rebellious, dangerous, unemployed, or prone to crime. This stereotype influences their behavior during patrols and arrests. But for the abolition of wandering in our laws, the highest

number of victims were youth. Wearing of dreadlock, driving a particular brand of car or dressing in a particular way may feed this stereotypical perception.

3. **Negative Cultural Narratives:** Social media, movies, and music sometimes promote anti-police sentiments. Likewise, police formations label protesting youth as "miscreants" or "troublemakers."
4. **Negative narratives** on both sides: While the youths see the police as oppressors, police see youths as threats.
5. **Lack of Communication and Engagement Platforms** and peaceful engagement: There are very few structured channels for dialogue between the police and the youth. Interactions frequently happen during crises, not in constructive forums.
6. **Socioeconomic Pressures:** Poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, and gang violence push some youth into crime, further worsening police perception of young people while the poverty thrust on the police officers by the Government aggravates the situation. This includes other conditions of service such as unreasonable and inhuman working hours.

But despite these challenges, we must believe that trust can be rebuilt. Because safety is a shared responsibility, and a nation cannot progress when its protectors and its future leaders stand on opposite sides.

The Case for Partnership

Despite the challenges, there is an urgent need to forge a new relationship between young people and law enforcement agencies. This partnership is not just desirable, it is essential and critical for peace, development, and democracy. Strong police-youth cooperation can:

- a) promote community safety and crime prevention and reduction;
- b) reduce incidences of confrontations, violence during protests and social unrest;
- c) strengthen democratic institutions and respect for human rights;
- d) encourage civic duty, participation and mutual responsibility in young citizens; and
- e) ensure early detection of criminal activities and enhance intelligence gathering while responding faster to threats.

Cultivating Trust: Pathways to a Stronger Relationship

Ladies and gentlemen, trust does not fall from the sky, it is built, deliberately and patiently. Let me share a few practical paths forward. To build trust, both the youth and the law enforcement agencies must adopt intentional actions: it must be purposeful. Some practical strategies and pragmatic steps include:

1. Community Policing and Youth Engagement

Law enforcement agencies should move away from force-driven policing to community-oriented policing. This approach fosters collaboration with residents, youth groups, NGOs, and religious bodies. I am aware that this initiative is ongoing but remains largely work in progress. The Police particularly need to fast-track. Youth advisory councils can be formed in police stations, allowing young people to consult with law enforcement officers on community safety issues. The youth advisory councils will enable the young people to voice their concerns and contribute to solutions. Currently what obtains is Police-community relations, which mostly consists of adults.

2. Dialogue and Peace Forums

Structured forums where police officers and young people meet periodically to discuss issues in a safe and neutral environment are essential. Such town hall meetings encourage free expression, resolve tensions, and humanize both parties. The platform must project safe spaces where youth and officers sit together, not during crises, but during normal times, to talk, listen, and understand. This must never wait until there is crisis. The Ministry of youth development can constitute the platform for such collaboration, and action it. Who triggers it is irrelevant. What matters is that it must be actualized, and actualized fast. *Ki okunrin ri ejo, ki obinrin pa, ani ki ejo sa tiku.*

3. Training and Education

Police officers should receive training by way of capacity building in emotional intelligence, psychology, communication, human rights, and conflict de-escalation. I know that to a very limited extent, the human rights training is ongoing and that human rights desk now exists in virtually all the divisions and commands. However, Police still remain police. In some instances, rather than allowing the officers responsible to concentrate on this bit, they are distracted most times with other general investigation duties. For other forms of capacities above, no traction is on. This is possibly due to poor funding of the Police institution. Until we, as a country, are ready for proper policing, the kind of appropriation we have for the

institution now will remain a general invitation to treat. In the same vein, youth must be educated about civic duties, legal rights, and the responsibilities of law enforcement officers. This comes with the restoration of subjects such as social studies, moral instruction, or citizenship. Glad that history has been restored now.

4. Involvement in Social Development Projects

Law enforcement agencies can partner with youth groups for community development such as renovating schools, environmental clean-ups, sensitization campaigns on drug abuse, and road safety. Just imagine police officers and young people working side by side in these endeavours. Such collaboration helps replace suspicion with empathy.

5. Accountability and Transparent Justice

Trust cannot exist without justice. No relationship can flourish without justice. Erring officers must be punished according to law, and the process should be transparent. Officers who abuse power must be held accountable. Equally, youth who commit crimes should be tried fairly. Youth must see that the system works, that there is no room for impunity. The complaints response unit of the Police must be restored and strengthened all over. The institution must appreciate the fact that it is a service provider who must have customer service unit or departments. Such must not only be transparent but must be efficient. Likewise, at the risk of repetition, youth involved in violence should be fairly tried under the law while availing them all instruments and opportunities of defence. The constitutional presumption of innocence must be promoted and upheld at all times. There must be no media trial nor stigmatization such as exposure to camera before trial. Intelligence must be strengthened all over the nooks and crannies of the country.

6. Technology and Social Media as Bridges

Instead of allowing social media to widen the divide, it can be used positively to promote transparency, publish police reforms, and showcase successful partnerships between police and youth. Instead of allowing social media to fuel hostility, let it be a tool for strengthening the relationship and partnership, for example, showing police reforms, community success stories, and heroic acts of both officers and youth.

Examples of Successful Collaborations

- **Rwanda:** Community policing forums involve youth in neighbourhood watch programs, crime reporting, and peace education.

- **Lagos State, Nigeria:** The Lagos State Security Trust Fund introduced platforms where youth interact with the police command to tackle cultism, traffic offenses, and drug abuse.
- **United Kingdom:** Police cadet programs involve teenagers in non-combative roles like awareness campaigns, parades, and traffic education. We can replicate this here. It is just like if we are all lawyers and know the law, infractions will automatically reduce.
- **United States:** In some cities, "Police-Youth Basketball Initiatives" bring officers and young people together in friendly sporting events. This can be extended to other games in Nigeria. This will even promote the fitness of both the youth and the police men. Mentorship programs can also be institutionalised.

The Responsibilities of Youth in Building Trust.

At this juncture, we now need to decompose the responsibilities of both parties in forging partnership. Youth cannot remain passive recipients in this partnership. My dear young people, you are not just beneficiaries, you are partners.

The youth must:

- respect the law and law enforcement officers;
- report crimes and volunteer as peace ambassadors;
- avoid stereotypes and violence against police officers; and
- participate in civic education, leadership training, and community service.

The Role of Law Enforcement Agencies

To our officers, their duty is sacred. For their part, police and other security institutions must:

- serve with integrity, fairness, and accountability; they must wear the uniform with honour and candour, not arrogance;
- ensure every officer understands that policing is a service, not a position of power; the policemen must be willing and ready to serve, and not to intimidate the citizens, particularly the youth; they must Protect, and Not Profile. Remember always that policing is not power, it is a public trust;
- adopt principles of transparency and uphold human rights; and
- encourage officers to live within the communities they serve.

Conclusion

The power of partnership between youth and law enforcement agencies is not one-sided; it is a shared journey. The youth embody energy, innovation, and the future. Law enforcement symbolises order, safety, and justice. Together, they can build societies where safety coexists with freedom, and authority is balanced with responsibility. Ladies and gentlemen, the youth carry the fire of the future. The police carry the shield of safety. When fire and shield work together, not against each other, our society becomes stronger, safer, and more peaceful.

Trust is not built in a day. It grows from consistent acts of honesty, respect, fairness and openness. When young people see law enforcement officers as protectors rather than predators, and police view youths as partners rather than suspects or enemies, then, and only then, will true peace and progress be achievable, and everlasting true partnership begins. This is the partnership that holds the power to transform nations. Let us build that powerful partnership for the sake of our communities, our nation, and our shared future.

Thank you.